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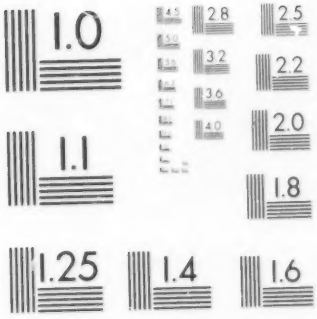

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ABSTRACT

A teacher experimented with her fourth grade students in order to determine how much revision took place in their writing. Originally, the teacher had been dissatisfied with the way she taught writing. Children wrote stories; she graded them. Then she began seriously examining the revision process as she observed it in her classroom. Students were given an assignment and told to revise it. Various approaches to teaching revision skills were utilized. The teacher made entries in a log to record students' development. Although at first it did not appear that students were implementing the skills, upon closer inspection it became apparent that there was much more revision occurring than the teacher had originally believed. As the months passed, the class continued to work on writing and became more conscious of revision in their writing. Finally, a set of guidelines emerged, including asking students about their choices, allowing students access to each other as they write, and letting students know they will have the opportunity to revise. (Samples of the writing and revising of one of the students are included.) (DF)

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DISCOVERING REVISION

by Elizabeth Sanford

Kathy and I were outside at break enjoying the lovely early spring day and each other's company. Kathy had brought her notebook, and as we sat and talked, she offered to read the poems she had been working on. One, "The Nose," was still in a preliminary stage. Another was about boats and was closer to being finished, Kathy felt. As I listened to all of the poems, I was struck by the variety of Kathy's topics and the sensitivity of her images.

"Kathy, how do you do it?" I asked.

"Well, I get all of my ideas poured onto a piece of paper, and then I get it straightened out," Kathy replied simply. She was articulating a theme I had seen repeated over and over in the previous few months--my fourth grade students evaluating and revising their writing, quite willingly and with purpose.

It hadn't always been that way. I had started out the year dissatisfied with the way I had always taught writing. Children in my classes rarely seemed to have the opportunity or inclination to produce "generations" of a piece of writing. They wrote stories, I read them and acknowledged them, and then they wrote more stories. I felt that I was the "keeper of the flame," that students were not working on

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their writing beyond the first draft, that they were involved only superficially with their writing.

Looking back, I wish I had recorded exactly what I thought happened in the ideal classroom where children regularly revised stories and produced final drafts. As clearly as I recall, I thought that a student wrote a piece, received reactions to his writing (perhaps from a reading/writing group or the teacher), and went on to write further drafts, until the piece was perfect in his eyes and acceptable to the teacher. In my classroom, though, students always seemed unwilling and unable to revise their work to any extent. I felt frustrated by the demands of managing a program where, to my eyes, so many students needed so much help. I knew many teachers had successful programs, and I hoped that doing research on what I thought was revision might help me.

I began looking at the revision process in my classroom in earnest the day that I asked my students to write a short piece about someone and revise it. I gave them no opportunity to test out their writing on other students or me; they could seek help outside school, but otherwise they were on their own. When I looked at the first and second drafts I had collected, I tried to determine what my students already knew about revision. I'm not sure what I hoped for. I may have wanted first and second drafts that were quite different. Perhaps I wanted second drafts that showed

"tasteful" changes, as well as more careful attention to capitalization, punctuation, and spelling. I think I probably wanted it all. I saw very few differences between the first and second drafts. I concluded that my students couldn't revise effectively.

At this point, I started to believe there was a body of revision skills I could teach my students, and I began planning how I would do it. I analyzed the errors in their work. There were all the usual problems: run-on sentences, overuse of some words, events out of sequence, too many "and thens." I presented lessons on these aspects of revision. At times, the focus was on an isolated skill, and I lifted sentences from student work to illustrate its application. Other times we revised whole pieces together, arriving at decisions by consensus. One time in particular, a colleague from another school gave me three drafts of a piece of writing a former student had done, along with the questions his reading/writing group had asked. I showed my students the first draft, inquiring what questions they would ask the author. When I displayed the group's questions and the second draft, my class saw that their questions were similar and that the author had answered them. We compared the second draft to the third with the same result. In all of these activities my students were talking about revision, but I saw little application of the skills in their writing.

During this period, I continued to observe my students' writing behaviors and to make entries into my research log.

I puzzled over what I was seeing, trying to decipher what might be going on during the writing process. I still didn't know how to get my students to the point that they could produce draft after draft, and I watched desperately, hoping something would tell me.

One day, during a health lesson, I gave my students a worksheet to complete. (It was sentence beginnings which they were to finish.) As children worked, I noticed Cindi erasing. When I asked, she explained to me that she had thought of an addition to one of her responses. Just then, she had been erasing a superfluous "and" and moving three words over to fill the gap it had left. It was a simple, logical explanation.

I found, later that evening, that Cindi was on my mind. I saw that her erasing and changing on the original paper had been revision, and I realized that revision of that nature occurs constantly. But, I asked myself, if it's revision when students write something and immediately change it, isn't it revision when the students, before they get their ideas on paper, somehow alter and refine what they are composing? I began to see that there was much more revision occurring than I had originally believed. I realized that I had assumed significant revision takes place only after the first draft is completed. Now I saw that my students were using revision skills I had not earlier recognized. It was about this time, I believe, that my perceptions about revision began to shift.

The following week, my students began writing personal experience stories. As they worked they tested their ideas on each other and on me. I saw students making choices and revising as they wrote, but perhaps I never would have known the extent of their choices if, almost by accident, I hadn't looked in detail at the progress of Cindi's story.

That morning, as students began writing, I had observed Cindi as she wrote her first three lines, balled up the paper, and began again. I asked her what had happened. She explained that as she had begun her story, she had remembered something connected to the story beginning. She had decided to include it and so had started over. I was interested in her decision, and I asked her to let me know of others she made as she wrote. We agreed to tape an interview about the writing of the story as soon as she had completed the first draft.

Cindi sought my help throughout the course of writing her first draft. Both before and during the interview, she was able to elaborate on choices she had made in her writing. I began to see that there was complexity to the decisions my students were making, and that what appeared on the paper often gave little indication of the underlying deliberations. The class, including Cindi, began working on second drafts of the stories. Cindi continued to seek me out, asking my opinion and telling me of her decisions. By the time the second draft was finished, we had done three more interviews.

The drafts of Cindi's story and the taped interviews offer abundant evidence of revision. I wasn't surprised by that. However, at that point I was still expecting most revision to occur after the completion of a draft. I had a mental picture of students sitting with their drafts and thoughtfully making deletions, additions, and changes in word choice and sentence order, prior to writing the next drafts. I was unprepared for the extent to which Cindi had revised as she was writing.

Cindi's story is about a time she was bitten by a dog. Here is the entire text of her first lead, and with it the first two paragraphs of the draft she designated her first draft. (I have made punctuation corrections for clarity.)

FIRST LEAD

> One day, I was outside around back, at the playground, with all my friends playing on the merry-go-round, when all (These two underlined words were erased on Cindi's paper.)

FIRST DRAFT

> One day, when I was six, I was around back, at the playground, with my brother, sister, and friends. We were playing on and taking turns on a tire swing, when all of a sudden a white, fluffy, medium size dog named "Snowball" came running around. We all jumped onto one thing, but we all fit. Snowball was jumping, barking, and running up and down a grass hill. Finally, he gave up and went home.
>
> After playing on the tire swing and slide, my brother and sister went home to do homework. We all went over to the merry-go-round. We would go real fast and see who could stay up the longest without sitting down. I never won. Then all of a sudden a black dog, medium size, chased people. Everybody jumped onto the merry-go-round but me.

> I ran. because I didn't know what to do. So I started to head for the merry-go-round, because I saw my friends on it. Before I could get on, the dog bit me. My leg was bleeding really bad.

In Cindi's initial start for the story, the setting had been the merry-go-round as the black dog appeared. By the time she had written three lines, her story had expanded, and she started over. The new version begins earlier, at the tire swing, with the appearance of the white dog. The story now includes Cindi's age and the presence of her brother and sister. This revision choice had changed the shape of the story.

I learned from Cindi, in our initial interview, of other decisions she made as she wrote the first draft. Two of them can be seen in the part of the text quoted above. Cindi volunteered that she had deliberated, in the second sentence, about whether to say "the tire swing" or "a tire swing." The difference, she noted, was "you don't know what the playground looks like, and I did know what the playground looks like, and I don't know which I should say." Later, in the final sentence of the first paragraph, Cindi had debated about saying that Snowball had given up and gone home:

> CINDI: I didn't know how to say it...if I should write "Finally he gave up," then write something else, or if I should just have left it, "He gave up and left." Or....
>
> ES: How did you decide on "went home"?
>
> CINDI: There's two ways that you can go to the playground, and he went one way, and it

seemed like he was going home because we were in the back, so I just said, "went home." I wasn't sure if he just went out front to play or what.

ES: So as a writer you're just making a guess about that? Are you saying that it's not worth your time to explain to the audience that you're not sure where he went?

CINDI: I didn't think it was that important.

Cindi went on to discuss other aspects of the first draft. She noted the use twice of "all of a sudden" and explained, "I shouldn't have used the same words." She planned to delete the earlier use of the phrase, she said, because the second time was when the action of the story really started. In another part of the story, Cindi pointed out that "before I started this paragraph I went back to read the story and I saw that I hadn't said where [the dog bit me.] I said leg, but I hadn't said where on my leg." Cindi noted that she planned to include that information in her next draft, "because down here [she reads from her draft]: 'I had to wear a bandage around my ankle.'" Throughout the interview, Cindi continued to explain decisions she had made as she had written. I remember realizing that the draft alone gave little evidence of the amount of work she had done during her writing.

The next step was to prove just as interesting and informative to me. The day following our interview, I asked Cindi to look over her first draft and write down any

questions she thought her audience might want answered. Cindi wrote and answered two questions:

1. Q: What thing did you jump onto?
   A: We jumped onto a wooden stand that had two sides to get up. One is chains, the other is bars.

2. Q: Where did the dog bite you on your leg?
   A: The dog bit me down by my ankle.

Then I asked Cindi to make her revisions on her first draft. Here are the only revisions she marked:

FIRST DRAFT	MARKED REVISIONS
were playing on and and taking turns on	(deleted first "on")
chased people	chased everybody
so I started to head for the merry-go-round	after a while I headed for the merry-go-round
bleeding really bad	bleeding badly
I still have a little scar that's very hard to see.	(deleted entire sentence)

Cindi began writing her second draft.

When Cindi completed the new draft, I compared it to the revised first draft. I had assumed that after marking her revisions on the first draft, she would simply recopy for legibility. Instead, I was surprised to see there were differences between the revised first draft and the second draft. Some of the revisions center around issues Cindi had already raised in the interview. For instance, her

uncertainty about where Snowball went has been resolved: "Finally he gave up and went around front." Cindi has also eliminated the first "all of a sudden." There are other text changes which relate to issues Cindi elaborated on in the interview. I concluded that the interview created an oral draft for Cindi.

However, there are also changes in the text which seem to have occurred during the writing of the second draft. These involve issues Cindi had not mentioned earlier. One of these can be seen in these excerpts from the texts. (I have again made corrections in mechanics.)

FIRST DRAFT

> Jokingly the boy said, "What's the matter?" Kendra said, "Your dog bit her." Then he said, "Oh, I'm so sorry." He said that jokingly, too.

SECOND DRAFT

> The boy saw that I was crying and jokingly said, "What's the matter?" Kendra said, "Your dog bit her." He said, "I'm sorry." He said that jokingly, too.

Why, I asked Cindi, had she been unwilling to use "all of a sudden" twice in the early part of the story, but she had kept each "jokingly"? Cindi's response gives further evidence of the type of decision making she was involved in as she wrote:

> CINDI: Well, I have two things to say. When I had the two "all of a suddens," I didn't think that sounded good because up there at the first "all of a sudden," not too much action

> was there. But down here...that's when the story really started...I got bit. And when I said "jokingly," I like that because he did say "I'm sorry" jokingly.... I didn't think that the audience would know that he said that jokingly.

Cindi and I discussed other parts of the second draft. Looking at her revisions, I could see that some seemed to be products of our first interview. Others were revisions she had marked on the first draft. Still others first appear in the second draft. Eventually, Cindi and I exhausted the comments and questions we had about the story. Cindi was appreciative of the opportunity she had had to discuss her writing, and she was proud of the work she had done. I was appreciative of the fascinating process I had been able to witness.

In the next few months, the class continued to work on writing. I felt that I better understood the work my students were doing as they wrote, and I could see that a major result of my work with Cindi was my greater awareness that students were revising early in their writing. I believed I was seeing much evidence of this, and recently I discussed this with my students. In looking through their writing folders, I asked, could they locate any instances when they knew they had made a revision before the completion of a draft? I asked them to let me know if they did.

As I talked with my class, John raised his hand and stated, matter of factly, "I know that I never do that." I

thanked him for his response, accepting what he said. A few minutes later, students began working on their writing. John came up to me. He did remember a place, he explained, where he had made an early revision. He had been working on a story about his grandparents one day, and halfway through, he had read his work to a few friends. One had suggested he substitute "there" for some of the "West Virginias," and he had liked the idea. He showed me his draft from that day, with the marks of revision on it.

The same afternoon, Matthew brought me a story he had written six months earlier--at a time when I had been convinced that my students couldn't revise. He explained about a plot change he had made near the end of a story:

> MATTHEW: I wrote all the first page, and then I came to the second page and wrote...ten lines. I kept thinking of other ideas, but...it was like my hand couldn't stop and it kept writing. ...And so, all of a sudden I got it all clear what I wanted to write and I forced my hand not to write. ...And then I got another piece of paper and I wrote down my other idea, and I read it over a couple of times. And so, I said, "That's the idea I wanted," on the other piece of scrap paper, and I put on the top "BEST." And so I threw away the [second page], and I started to write my idea and then more stuff came to me.

Other children came up to me that day. Kathy showed me where she had erased and reerased the ages of three children in a story, as she weighed the advantages of each choice to the plot. Stephanie explained the process she had gone through in writing the beginning of a story:

STEPHANIE: And see, I had a whole paragraph that I had in my mind, that I thought was good, but then I stopped to think, "Well, this isn't what I really want," because I had a better idea. ...I put a whole new paragraph down which I really thought was better than what I had planned before.

As these students discussed with me examples of early revision, another of my students, Rachel, gave me a chance to observe the process firsthand. I had just finished talking to a student when Rachel approached me for help with the story she was writing. It was a story about a playground accident she had witnessed the previous year. Rachel said, "I got stuck somewhere around [the third line] and went back and read it again." She had realized then that she should include that her classmate's fall was "off the monkey bars," and she added those words as she read the story to me. Now, twenty lines into the story, she needed help with another problem. She knew she wanted to incorporate the information that the principal had told the class they would be the first ones to know how the girl was, but Rachel wasn't sure where she should insert it. I suggested she write the sentence in the margin until she decided, so she wouldn't lose it. Rachel was satisfied and went back to her seat to continue writing. I was satisfied, too--my students had reconfirmed that they revise as they write.

I feel I have learned a great deal this year about how students write. At the same time, I've learned more about my own role in the classroom. I can see that as I worked with

my students during the past several months, I gradually adopted certain strategies as a response to what I was learning. The strategies were spontaneous; I wasn't always aware of them or of the reasons that lay behind them. As a way to gain understanding, though, I've tried to express those strategies as a set of guidelines for myself:

1. Ask students about their choices.

This year I frequently asked my students the reasons for the choices that they made. This gave me insight into the kinds of issues these writers were confronting, and I began to have a clearer sense of how to help them. I believe that my students began to pay more attention to their choices and to take their writing more seriously.

2. Be available to your students as they write.

I began to see that when students wrote, they frequently sought me out for help. They had questions about phrasing, or about the right words to use, or about where in a story to introduce an idea. I stopped scheduling small group instruction or housekeeping tasks for myself during writing periods. Instead, I used that time to work with students who wanted help.

3. Allow students access to each other as they write.

For years, I insisted on very quiet classroom writing periods, believing that students couldn't concentrate on their writing if they talked. Now I see that as students discuss their writing, they are getting advice and resolving

issues, and I am more comfortable with the inevitable hum.

4. Provide blocks of time for writing.

It is difficult for students to work on a piece of writing when they are interrupted. I try to schedule writing periods when there will be no interruptions, and when no students will be taken out of the room for special programs.

5. Let students know they will have the opportunity to revise.

I noticed, as I worked with students, that they asked "Are we going to revise?" with increasing frequency. Some students began to approach their writing differently when they knew they would have the opportunity to revise. They seemed more willing to take risks, knowing they could later rework choices they felt hadn't been effective.

6. Look for evidence of revision at any stage.

Perhaps the greatest impact my work has had is my realization that revision occurs constantly. I now feel that my role is to find evidence of revision in my students' work. Then, as I talk to students about their choices, I can help them see the possibilities in their writing.

I'm pleased with what my class and I have accomplished, although I still have questions. I see less evidence of decision making in the work of the less able writers. Is there a difference in the process that these writers go through, or do they revise in the same way but revise less?

Are they at a different stage of revision? Finding answers to these questions could help me as I help these writers.

I admire the work all my students do. As I watch, I see that they are writing thoughtfully, trying new strategies, finding out what works. Together, we are discovering revision.